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ABSTRACT

This information brief describes problems involved in scheduling elementary-school specialist teachers and offers suggestions for resolving them. Poor scheduling results in fragmented classes, unequal distribution of instructional time, and lack of common planning time. Poor scheduling is usually due to lack of congruence between school mission and schedules, schedule design conducted by individuals or the central office, and periods of unequal length. Two samples of effective schedules are described--a master-block schedule and a four-day rotation cycle. The following recommendations are offered for designing specialists' schedules: (1) base decisions on what is best for the core instructional program; (2) determine needs and resources; (3) have the central office negotiate equitable arrangements among schools that share traveling personnel; (4) negotiate equal-length specialist periods, or at the very least, modular-length periods; and (5) break away from the Monday-through-Friday, once-a-week schedule. Two figures are included. (LMI)

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"When Can I Have Your Kids?"

Scheduling Specialist Teachers

Michael D. Rettig and Robert Lynn Canady

"When can I have your kids?" asks the music teacher. All too often, elementary school specialists' schedules are based on this question. What results is a schedule characterized by the haphazard and inefficient assignment of personnel and the fragmentation of core instructional time for classroom teachers. When specialists' and pull-out teachers' schedules are combined,* classroom teachers become traffic directors, rarely having an entire class in attendance. This often results in a diluted sense of accountability and efficacy, as teachers rationalize, "If I don't have my kids, I can't very well teach them, can I?"

The Effects of Poor Scheduling

• *Fragmentation.* It is not unusual for an elementary class to be assigned physical education two days a week at one time for 30 minutes, art once a week at another time for 50 minutes, and music two days in another time block for 20-40 minutes. We have worked with schools where, to provide state- and locally mandated programs, a teacher's class was fragmented ten different times during the week, dramatically reducing the time available for core instruction. While one self-contained classroom teacher probably can plan basic instruction around such a schedule, it becomes impossible for all teachers at a grade level to find concurrent uninterrupted instructional time. Thus teaming and regrouping possibilities are reduced or made impossible.

• *Unfairness.* Teacher inservice days, parent conferences, and holidays tend to fall on Mondays or Fridays. Thus, students with special classes scheduled on those days often receive less instruction in the program than other students; teachers with the accompanying planning period receive less planning time. Another issue is the assignment of preferred times within the specialists' schedules. It has been our observation that within the "When-can-I-have-your-kids?" model, teachers who are friendly with specific specialists receive the preferred times for their special classes and planning periods.

• *Lack of common planning time.* Teachers involved in school improvement efforts need time together to plan, evaluate, and participate in staff development. All too often, however, the only time teachers at the same grade level can get together is during lunch, or before and

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Articles by Canady on parallel block scheduling appeared in the January 1990 and January 1993 issues of NAESP's Principal *magazine.*

* *Specialists" are defined here as teachers who provide programs that all children attend, such as classroom, music, art, physical education, computer lab, library-media, and foreign language. "Pull-out" programs are those which students must choose or qualify for, such as Chapter 1, special ed, gifted and talented, ESL, and instrumental music.*

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after school. While many schools attempt to schedule common planning time during the school day, teachers are often fortunate to have one such period a week.

Causes of Poor Schedules

• *Lack of congruence between school mission and schedules.* Most elementary school mission statements include a primary emphasis on the core instructional program, especially skills in language arts and mathematics. Yet we almost always schedule these critical subjects around times when students attend lunch and specialists' classes. If mission statements were truly guides for action, schools would schedule specialist schedules around core instruction, not the reverse. For example, the schedule is constructed to allow the art teacher to work with the same grade level classes in consecutive periods on the same day. If one third-grade class has art from 9:00-10:00 a.m, another third grade has art from 10:00-11:00, and the *third* third grade has art from 11:00-noon, there is no common planning time, no possible cooperation among the three teachers during these three hours, and the morning's core instruction is fragmented.

• *Schedules designed by individuals.* When various specialty and pull-out teachers ask, "When can I have your kids?" there is no overall plan, resources are wasted, and specialists' schedules often have gaping holes.

• *Schedules designed by central office.* A central office administrator is often charged with assigning specialists to individual schools. This responsibility has two extremes: either benign neglect or over-attention to detail. Each style has its problems.

When specialist assignments are *laissez-faire*, schedules evolve over time, sometimes based on non-educational criteria such as the instructors' proximity to home or babysitters. These schedules tend to be inefficient, often wasting time on travel between schools and encouraging the "When-can-I-have-your-kids?" model.

At the other extreme (and more prevalent), is the central office person who, in the name of efficiency and equality among schools, determines the exact number of regular classrooms in each school, multiplies this by the number of weekly minutes, and calculates the number of days each school needs. While this schedule guarantees students equal exposure to these specialized programs, it is so tight and inflexible that all other instructional programs must revolve around it. It may look good on paper, but it fragments core instructional time and provides little continuity for the specialists' programs.

• *Periods of variable length.* Probably the major cause of fragmented instructional time is that the programs are often in periods of different length. It's not unusual to have 20-to-40-minute physical education and music periods several times a week, 40-to-60-minute art classes once a week, and library-media classes from 20 to 50 minutes a week. Piecing together an efficient and sensible schedule when periods are of unequal length is virtually impossible.

MASTER BLOCK SPECIALIST CYCLE AND PLANNING SCHEDULE

	8:40-9:25	9:30-10:15	10:20-11:05	11:10-11:55	12:00-12:25	12:30-1:15	1:20-2:05	2:10-2:55
Kind.								Plan Cycle
Grade 1							Plan Cycle	
Grade 2						Plan Cycle		
Grade 3				Plan Cycle				
Grade 4			Plan Cycle					
Grade 5		Plan Cycle						
Specialist	Plan	Grade 5	Grade 4	Grade 3	Lunch	Grade 2	Grade 1	Kind.

Figure 1

Effective Schedules

Although circumstances and staff vary for every school, the following examples meet these goals: quality time for specialists' programs; common grade-level or team planning time; and unfragmented instructional time for core subjects.

Our master block schedule (*Figure 1*) assumes a school day of 6 1/2 hours, with four classroom teachers at each grade level and *full-time* P.E., music, art, guidance, and library-media teachers. Specialists' classes are provided to all teachers at one grade level at the same time every day.

Kindergartners attend specialist classes from 2:10-2:55 p.m., grade 1 from 1:20-2:05 p.m., grade 2 from 12:30-1:15 p.m., grade 3 from 11:10 a.m.-11:55 a.m., grade 4 from 10:20-11:05 a.m., and grade 5 from 9:30-10:15 a.m. All specialists would have planning time from 8:40-9:25 a.m. and lunch from 12:00-12:25 p.m. Five minutes are provided between classes.

Specific times for each grade level are a matter for negotiation. Almost all teachers want morning time for core instruction, but some grades must participate in the specialists' cycle during the morning. We generally reserve afternoon planning and specialists' periods for the early grades. (First-grade teachers don't believe you can teach reading in the afternoon.) However, you may not

PROFESSIONAL ADVISORY

This article is in support of the following standard from *Proficiencies for Principals*, Revised (NAESP 1991).

Leadership. The principal must identify and creatively coordinate the use of available human, material, and financial resources to achieve the school's mission and goals.

want to allocate the last slot to kindergarten, because young students—with boots, hats, gloves, and notes—take longer to prepare for dismissal.

Because specialists no longer serve grade levels consecutively, planning lessons and changing materials becomes somewhat more difficult. To ease the problem, we avoid alternating back and forth between intermediate and primary classes, but serve grades 3-5 before lunch and grades K-2 after lunch. You might also flip-flop morning and afternoon blocks during the year.

One elementary school organized into multi-grade-level teams with one teacher from first, second, and third grades. Common planning time was structured for each team, thus allowing all students at a grade level to have the same special class on the same day, and simplifying specialists' lesson planning.

While we encourage teachers to use common planning time for cooperative efforts, scheduling special classes during the same block also serves another purpose: it clears the rest of the school day for collaborative team-teaching and grade-level-wide activities.

Figure 2 illustrates a four-day rotation of specialists for one grade. For instance, the students in 1A would have P.E. on day 1, art on day 2, music on day 3, and on day 4, alternating library or guidance. The rotation begins again on day 5. If an inservice or snow day interrupts, the schedule picks up on the next school day with the next day of the cycle.

The library/guidance schedule has a great deal of flexibility. For example, the librarian could run a full-day schedule for four days, then hold "open library" for four days; the guidance schedule would be the reverse. The librarian could meet with morning classes one cycle and afternoon classes the next cycle. Library-media advocacy groups advocate open library or flexible scheduling of the media center. If your library-media specialist takes the *initiative* to seek out teachers and help them plan units and design lessons using the media center's resources, then don't use this schedule. If, however, the library-media specialist does not aggressively pursue teachers and students, but offers assistance only on request, then schedule the library at least half-time. This example gives all children a scheduled library period every eight days, and occupies half the specialist's day.

Although schools often provide more time for P.E. than for art or music, these schedules provide an equal amount of time for physical education, music, and art, with half that time devoted to guidance and media activities. Ideally, with site-based management, the decision to emphasize one program over another should be driven by the individual school's mission and needs, but the district's assignment of specialists' time is often the controlling factor. So it becomes imperative for schools to be actively involved with central office personnel in negotiating these allocations.

Many teachers, both specialist and classroom, argue that not much can be accomplished in one music or art period per week. It may make more sense to have the art teacher spend an entire semester in one school, while the music teacher works in a partner school. Children would receive two periods of art per week one semester and two periods of music a week the next. In addition to adding continuity, such a plan would also reduce the number of students a specialist serves each semester. Under this plan, however, schools must rethink holiday music programs—perhaps alternating spring and fall programs every other year. Another technique would be to schedule two art periods one week and two music periods the next.

Admittedly, larger schools with full-time specialists are generally easier to schedule than small schools with one or two teachers per grade level. Such schools encounter distinct challenges in assigning specialists. They typically share personnel with several other schools in the district, so must negotiate complementary scheduling plans. For example, a K-5 school with one teacher per grade level might be assigned an art teacher on Monday, music on Wednesday, library personnel on Friday, and a P.E. teacher on Tuesdays and Thursdays. These specialists would work in other schools for the remainder of their teaching load. This would permit a regular daily planning period for all teachers.

Designing Schedules

Several general principles should guide the creation of specialists' schedules.

• *Base decisions on what's best for the core instructional program.* Decisions on schedules should not be made by individuals asking, "When can I have your kids?" Creating the school schedule is one of the most important tasks each year, and as such, warrants input from all teachers and the concentrated efforts of a designated committee. The final design should reflect the mission of the school and

FIRST GRADE SPECIALISTS' 4-DAY CYCLE 1:20-2:05 P.M.

TEACHER	DAY 1	DAY 2	DAY 3	DAY 4
TEACHER 1A	PHYSICAL EDUCATION	ART	MUSIC	LIBRARY/ GUIDANCE
TEACHER 1B	LIBRARY/ GUIDANCE	PHYSICAL EDUCATION	ART	MUSIC
TEACHER 1C	MUSIC	LIBRARY/ GUIDANCE	PHYSICAL EDUCATION	ART
TEACHER 1D	ART	MUSIC	LIBRARY/ GUIDANCE	PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Figure 2

should support the core instructional program.

• *Determine needs and resources.* Most school personnel are unaware of the overall school schedule and thus, of exactly what might be possible in matching needs and resources. Schools must understand their needs and resources before deciding on a plan for their allocation.

• *Have central office negotiate equitable arrangements among schools that share traveling personnel.* Don't wait until the district allocates specialists to begin pondering the year's schedule. The school should determine its needs (within approved programs), then aggressively negotiate to meet those needs. We suggest that central office personnel mediate a joint meeting of principals and representatives from the specialist groups. In large districts, the central office could assign specialists to a cluster of schools and allow these schools to design their own sharing arrangements.

• *Negotiate equal-length specialist periods, or at the very least, modular-length periods.* We recommend that schools adopt equal-length specialists' periods. The length negotiated will invariably involve compromise. Physical education and music personnel generally prefer shorter, more frequent classes; art specialists want longer times. There is questionable value in short instructional periods of 30 minutes or less. Given the time lost for travel, class beginnings, endings, set-up and clean-up, a 30-minute scheduled class is unlikely to contain more than 15-20 minutes of quality instructional time. If compromise can't be reached, schools may consider pairing two shorter classes with a longer period. For example, at a three-class grade level, while one group is in art for 60 minutes, the other two classes might be assigned music and P.E., exchanging with each other after 30 minutes.

• *Break away from the Monday-Friday once-a-week schedule.* Any school scheduler will tell you that five is an unwieldy number. If every class in the school is to receive two periods of physical education weekly, the P.E. teacher can provide this service to only two-and-a-half classes during one time slot. Thus, for the "extra" class to receive the second period of P.E., either a time slot must be moved (causing fragmentation of the core instructional time), or an additional P.E. teacher must provide the second period, giving that class two different P.E. teachers. Alternatively, a hole must be left in the P.E. teacher's schedule. We have found that four-day and six-day rotations work much better. They also provide a solution to the loss of classes on Monday and Friday. Teachers and students adapt quickly to the new rotation, and fears about confused and wandering teachers and students are unfounded.

During what are perhaps the most important years of our children's education, many elementary schools are cavalier about the precious commodity called time. We have found that through focusing on mission, technical skill, negotiation, and cooperation, schools can design and implement schedules which enhance the instructional program. Time is a rich resource; let's use it wisely.

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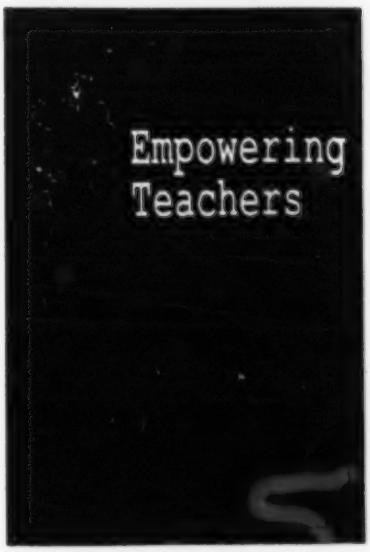

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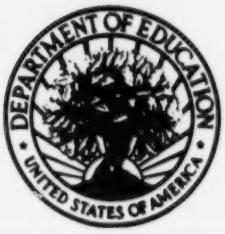

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